The time has come to start the garden. The last frost for the spring is April 21st. This can vary one week, more or less. The garden spot has been turned with a spade, fork or plow and the organic compost worked in to the soil. You have your seeds and plan for placement of them in the garden. Remember to rotate crops. Rotation of crops will keep pest control easier. Rotating crops keeps soil nutrients from being depleted by the same crops being planted in one area over and over again.

The use of a tiller makes it easy to break the clods you have made with the plow, fork or spade. It is easier to make rows with the hoes after tilling. If your garden is on a slant remember to go across the hill with the rows. Depending on the type of plant the rows and spacing will be different. Tomatoes, squash, melon, cucumbers all need lots of room. Bush beans, okra, corn, and peppers will use less area. The soil temperature to plant will vary but 70-80 degrees is needed for good germination.

The rows can be made with a string (as a guide) to make the rows straight. With lots of practice you will be able to hoe a straight line. Remember that even if the row is crooked it will still grow! So have fun with it. Family game of who has the straightest row will always bring out the help and fun.

The seeds are sown in the row and covered with soil depth required by the seed packet. Tamp the soil firmly over the seeds and then water in the row. Mark the row with a flag or stick, and label it. Be creative with the labels. Kids can decorate them. Remember to use something that will not wash off.

For transplanting plants like tomatoes, peppers, and cabbage, the holes are made deep going over the root ball. When opening the plant container note the roots are full and circled up. If the root ball looks bound separate the roots a little. To protect the plant from cut worms wrap a small piece of newspaper around the stem at the base of the plant and extending above the ground 1 inch. Tomatoes like calcium so putting egg shells or oyster shell around the base will be good. Remember to water the plant in after planting.

Remember to mulch between the rows to keep down the weeds and to keep the water from evaporating. Watering can be done several ways: hand watering each plant, or using a soaker hose or drip system. These are all done at the base of the plant. The best time to water is early morning. There is less water evaporation, it decreases the growth of fungi and the plants will dry before dark.

This is a good start to having food for the table and fun for the family.
Arkansas gardeners have many trials to overcome, including rocky soil, Bermuda grass, and invasive insects; but through careful attention and proper maintenance, healthy productive soil is attainable. Winter is the best time to test soil and see if it lacks nutrients, has a desirable pH level, and to plan accordingly when thinking about the next season’s garden layout, considering crop rotations and re-energizing soil through adding materials to the ground. Tomatoes and corn are notoriously heavy feeders, so an easy way to replace the nitrogen they took from the soil is to simply plant nitrogen enriching plants, such as beans or cover crops, in their place.

With regards to soil health, other ideas to think about are aeration and water retention capabilities. Worms provide aeration to soil by tunneling through the depths in search of organic matter, but sometimes more drastic methods are necessary. For soils that are mostly clay based, peat and straw are excellent amendments which can be worked into the soil to loosen it and improve drainage are ideal. On the other hand, sandy soils having issues retaining water may also use peat or vermiculite. When applying these amendments, they should be well-worked into the ground, unlike mulches which stay on top of the soil to prevent weeds and act as landscape barriers. Many mulches can be used as amendments, especially if they have decomposed to the point that they are no longer effective as mulches.

A great reason to be a gardener in Arkansas is the fact that, all over the state, soil tests are free at local Extension offices. The most important tip to remember with the soil tests is that it is a representative sample of soil and is necessary to get a good sense of a garden’s state of health, thus samples should come from several areas in a garden and should have detailed information about what has been grown there. The tests will check for the presence of major chemicals: Nitrogen (N), Phosphorus (P), and Potassium (K), among others and give fertilizer and lime treatments for pH recommendations where needed. County extension agents can give more detailed information about fertilizers on request and provide further information to make this year’s crops, soil, and future crops better than ever before.

Raised beds can be a great gardening solution for those of us with rocky soil and poor drainage. Placing a sheet of hardware cloth along the bottom of the bed can thwart subterranean creatures such as moles and voles. And, once established, raised beds require a minimal amount of upkeep. However, their upkeep is not labor free.

Before spring arrives, the main chore is assessing the need for soil amendments. After taking a soil sample, it is important to turn the soil. Though soil shouldn’t be packed hard, it may be slightly compacted from the fall and winter rains, making the level of the soil less than it was when the bed was originally created. Turning the soil will raise the level a bit. Then any necessary amendments can be added: potash, peat moss, composted manure, and soil. Additional soil can come from your compost pile, potting soil, and/or topsoil.

All of these additions should be thoroughly incorporated into the existing soil in order to distribute them evenly and to raise the level of the bed. Just don’t forget to leave room for a thick layer of mulch to go around your precious seedling once they break through the soil. This mulch will hold in moisture and keep the weeds at bay.
Garden Dreams: Garden Prep with Seed Catalogs

This article was written in January, but you can still access online information from these sources, and its never too late to get on mailing lists!

Gardens are at rest now; there’s probably nothing more to do outdoors for now. It may seem like the wrong time to think about spring, but as seasoned home gardeners know, the long nights of winter are an excellent time to think about gardening, about what worked last year, what might work this year, and what to plant where. And nothing helps you organize these thoughts like a stack of seed catalogs to get your imagination going. Right now is the time that seed catalogs start arriving in the mail or seed companies can be accessed online. Happily, there’s never been a better selection of seed catalogs available, given the emphasis many home gardeners place on heirloom varieties and organic practices. There’s still time to request the free catalogs, allowing two to six weeks for them to arrive. There’s something hands-on about flipping through a catalog that appeals to me.

**Baker Creek’s Whole Seed Catalog:** I just got the $7.95 Baker Creek’s Whole Seed Catalog and it’s a glorious production, a photographic dream with 352 pages with anecdotes, histories, and more. All the new offerings for 2015 are available to see online. Baker Creek has a free heirloom seed catalog and it can be requested at [www.rareseeds.com](http://www.rareseeds.com) if you don’t want to spring for the Whole Seed Catalog.

**Seed Savers Exchange** is another source of heirloom, untreated, non-hybrid, non-GMO seeds and its catalog can be requested at [www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org). This is a nonprofit dedicated to the sharing and saving of heirloom seeds. It’s a good first-stop shop for not just seeds but for supporting the cause of seed saving.

**Territorial Seed Company** at [www.territorialseed.com](http://www.territorialseed.com) teaches one how to plant every variety, tells about pests, and guides you from germination to harvest. Territorial also has an online garden planner that can be accessed free of charge for 30 days, which is long enough to plan your spring garden.

**The Cook’s Garden** may have less of an emphasis on heirlooms and organics, but they don’t overlook them. The focus is on growing food from a culinary perspective, emphasizing flavors and making herbs vital. You get a sense they know home gardeners want to pack a lot of effect into small plots, as shown in their “kaleidoscope mix” of carrots, featuring a spectrum of colors. Order your catalog at [www.cooksgarden.com](http://www.cooksgarden.com). One of our master gardeners has ordered plants from Cook’s Garden and has emphasized how well packaged the plants are, arriving in pristine condition.

**Pine Tree Garden Seeds,** located at [www.superseeds.com](http://www.superseeds.com), is another master gardener recommendation. I haven’t gotten the catalog yet, but the website is a real treat, well-done. I’m ready to get my hands on this catalog.

There are numerous catalogs out there. Online you can search seed catalogs to get a taste of additional ones. Meanwhile, enjoy your garden dreams.
MASTER GARDENER CLUB OFFICERS

President-Sharon Joslin

WELCOME TO MEMBERS

John and Marilee Bachmann
Andie Hession
Lacy Cornell
David and Laura Timby
Laura Clark
Edna Mae Wells
Suzie McCormick
Gary Welchman

You are invited to be a guest at one of our Master Gardener meetings at the Searcy County Extension Office on the 3rd Thursday of each month at 10 a.m.